



Superior Court of California County of Riverside

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MEDIA ADVISORY

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<http://riverside.courts.ca.gov/newsmedia/newsmedia.htm>)

COURT ANNOUNCES LATEST INITIATIVE TO INCREASE ACCESS FOR CIVIL LITIGANTS

RIVERSIDE COUNTY: The Riverside County Superior Court is pleased to announce its latest effort to further enhance access to justice for civil litigants. Effective December 15, 2008, a group of retired Riverside County justices and judges will be available to hear civil trials and perform settlement conferences to resolve cases.

Presiding Judge Richard T. Fields commented, "In the coming months, the court will be fortunate to have a group of retired Riverside County judicial officers with a great deal of experience available to further the court's initiatives directed at providing greater access to civil trials. Justice James Ward, Court of Appeal, 4th Appellate District, as well as Judges Charles Field, Dallas Holmes, Michael Kaiser, Stephen Cunnison, and Victor Miceli will be available to conduct trials or settle cases."

The announcement comes on the heels of several other successful initiatives the court has undertaken this year to augment access to the court for civil litigants, including the implementation of a civil master trial calendar department. While cases are initially directly assigned to a case management department and all motions and pre trial matters are heard there, once a case announces ready for trial it is sent to the master trial calendar department for a trial status conference. The master calendar assigns trial dates and is calling approximately 20 cases set for trial each Monday. Motions and other matters that arise between the trial status conference date and the trial date are heard back in the case management department.

The court provided another avenue for accessibility to civil litigants when three courtrooms dedicated to civil trials were opened in January of this year at the vacant Hawthorne Elementary School in Riverside. Civil trials have been heard at that location on a continuous basis.

The court replicated the success at Hawthorne by providing similar access to civil litigants in the court's desert region when the Palm Springs Civil Autry Courthouse was

opened on September 8, 2008. The new facility includes one courtroom dedicated exclusively to civil trials, a jury assembly room, a jury deliberation room, judicial chambers, and office space.

The Hawthorne and Autry Courthouses are staffed by retired judges from Riverside and other counties provided by the Judicial Council as part of its Assigned Judges Program.

These efforts, and others, have led to a dramatic increase in the number of civil trials the court is conducting this year. From January through October 2008 the court has heard 69 jury trials and 88 court trials. Presiding Judge Fields noted, "The court is on pace to hear 189 jury and court trials this year. This would represent the most civil trials the court has heard since 2001, and every year thereafter."

The court has also heightened efforts to resolve cases without going to trial. One successful effort was the implementation of the Master Calendar Trial Settlement Program. Local attorneys were invited to participate in a pilot program to help settle certain cases appearing for trial at the Monday morning master calendar. Complete settlement agreements have been reached on a number of cases and the court has approved continuation of the program.

Resolution of civil cases at an early stage in the proceedings is critical. On November 22, 2008, the Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution concluded its mediation program for the first time in Riverside. The intense six-day program provided local attorneys with world-class mediation training and prepared them to mediate a wide range of civil cases filed in the court. Participants included six judicial officers and 36 attorneys from throughout Riverside County and neighboring counties. These attorneys, and others who have already met the requisite training, will, subject to court approval, join the court's new Civil Mediation Panel to help implement the court's new Civil Mediation Programs, effective January 2009. These programs will help reduce civil case congestion while expanding civil litigants' options for early, effective, less costly and less adversarial resolutions of their cases. Mediation offers litigants the opportunity to create dispute resolution processes and agreements that are appropriate for their unique situations.

Beginning in January 2009, litigants in most civil cases under \$50,000 will be ordered to select either nonbonding judicial arbitration or mediation to try to resolve their disputes as early in the case as possible. Such litigants are entitled to three hours of mediation services at no cost, with the mediator of their choice. The court's Alternative Dispute Resolution web page will provide "Mediator Profiles" to help litigants identify appropriate mediators for their cases.

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